

Russia Resurgent: the Crisis in Ukraine & the Challenge to Global Governance



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Nearly a decade ago, during his annual state of the nation address to the Russian Duma on April 25, 2005, President Vladimir Putin famously opined on Russian television that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. And for the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our citizens and compatriots found themselves outside the Russian Federation.” In essence, Putin communicated to the world two of his primary goals as president – to see the expansion of Russia through the reacquisition of territories and Russian peoples “lost” in 1991, and the return of Russia to the great power (if not superpower) status the Soviet Union had enjoyed during the Cold War.

Since late 2013, Russia’s neighbor, Ukraine, has been paralyzed by a deep political crisis that is as much the result of long-term domestic political instability as external influence and pressure, most directly from Moscow. The current crisis in Ukraine, so obviously being manipulated by Putin, continues the Russian leader’s designs to redress the balance of Russian power in Eastern Europe and restore Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. While the outcome of the current crisis is unclear, Ukraine is the focus of Russia’s challenge not only to the regional balance of power, but also to the existing strictures of global governance. Over the long term, the events in Ukraine may foreshadow a return to a global system more akin to the great power diplomacy and politics that dominated the 19th and early 20th centuries, or even the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the world may look back at the Ukraine crisis as another step in the erosion of the United Nations as a mechanism for global governance.

Great Power & Greater Russia

Putin’s assertive national security policy continues an age-old Russian strategy of pushing Russia’s borders to the furthest extent possible, yet keeping the satellite states around the Russian periphery firmly within its orbit of control. Dependent upon Moscow for their security, economic well-being, infrastructure, and even energy requirements, these client states have leaned toward Russia out of basic self-preservation. Otherwise, these relatively weak satellite states in the Russian “near abroad” risked offending Moscow at their own peril.

The relationship Belarus has with Russia is the perfect example of a country which strongly tilts towards Moscow, with Moscow able to leverage its political, economic, and military weight against Minsk when the two countries might not exactly see eye to eye. After the fall of the Soviet Union, and especially after President Alexander Lukashenko came to power, Belarus was an ideal candidate for re-integration with the Russian Federation, highlighted by the February 1995 “Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation” between the two countries. Indeed, the establishment of a bilateral free trade agreement in the early 1990s followed by the creation of a unified state between the Russian Federation and Belarus on Dec. 8, 1999 was the culmination of several years of diplomatic efforts by then Russian President Boris Yeltsin in response to the western drift of other former Soviet bloc states such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and their expected incorporation into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance and the European Union.

When Putin came to power on Dec. 31, 1999, he tried to tie Minsk

even closer to Moscow through expanded economic relations, the implementation of a bilateral customs union in 2001, as well as the supply of discounted Russian natural gas to meet Belarus’ energy needs. The current diplomatic leverage Moscow enjoys over Minsk is revealed by some of the latest figures in the *CIA World Factbook*, which show that Russia was the destination for over 35% of all exports by Belarus in 2012, while it supplied over 95% of Belarus’ consumption of approximately 22 billion cubic meters of natural gas in 2011.

On the other hand, countries and regions in the Russian “near-abroad” which have challenged Moscow’s dominance and leaned too far away from the Russian center of gravity have felt the political, economic and military weight of Russia. For example, Russia has fought two wars in Chechnya since the early 1990s (and continues to deal with a low-level insurgency and terrorist attacks by Chechen rebels) to prevent the tiny North Caucasus region from becoming an independent state. Although the overall international community expressed great shock and roundly condemned the extensive civilian casualties caused by Russian military operations, especially in the Chechen capital of Grozny, little was actually done other than involve the UN and the European Court of Human Rights to address specific instances of human rights violations.

Similarly, the Republic of Georgia developed unusually strong relations with the West, specifically through close affiliation with, and proposed memberships of, the EU and NATO; the US-sponsored Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) for Georgian armed forces; and the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline circumventing Russia, all of which chilled Tbilisi’s relations with Moscow in the 1990s and early 2000s. Matters came to a head in

August 2008 with the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian war, in which Moscow supported the pro-Russian breakaway Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The conflict resulted in a quick and decisive Russian military victory, the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from these areas, the recognition by Russia of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, as well as the installation of Russian military bases in these areas. Again, despite strong moral support for Tbilisi by the West during the David-and-Goliath-like war with Russia, the United States and its European allies provided little tangible help to Georgia besides sending humanitarian aid and imposing modest sanctions on Russia, later lifted by US President Barack Obama in May 2010.

Since February 2014, however, the crisis in Ukraine has threatened not only to redraw the borders of Eastern Europe that were established in 1991, but also to overturn, at least partially, the international order that was created by the ending of the Cold War and significantly reverse the great Russian “geopolitical catastrophe”. Putin’s high-stakes gamble to dismember Ukraine as a result of the overthrow of the pro-Russian Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, by pro-Western demonstrators has put Russia and the West on a collision course. While previous Russian challenges to the post-Cold War order in Chechnya and Georgia were relatively localized affairs, the current crisis in Ukraine has much more serious implications and could lead to a series of events that may significantly alter the current status of global governance.

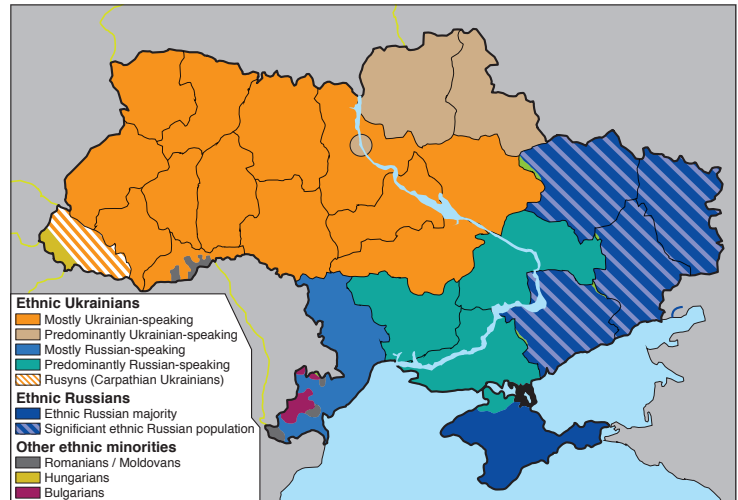
Ukraine Instability Exposed

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was rife with political and economic instability. The sources of this instability were extensive and far-ranging, first and foremost deriving from the fact that despite independence, the Ukrainian population of approximately 44 million people includes a significant Russian minority comprising 17% of the total, located primarily in Ukraine’s southern and eastern provinces. In these provinces, which include the key jurisdictions of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk, ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers comprise the majority of the local populations who in the early 1990s supported joining the then newly formed Republic of Ukraine as a means to escape their plight after approximately 70 years of Soviet economic mismanagement. It should be highlighted that these provinces are also home to key industrial and high-technology centers that are very much prized by both Ukraine and Russia, whereas the economy of the western, Ukrainian-dominated provinces is more agriculturally based. Today, after nearly a quarter century of misrule from Kiev, the local Russian populations are now wary of the Republic of Ukraine which has not lived up to expectations, while just across the border, Russia under Putin appears more like the confident, politically, militarily and economically secure great power of days past ([Map](#)).

Since independence, charges of political corruption, economic mismanagement, crony capitalism, and electoral fraud have become commonplace features in Ukrainian political life despite perceptions in the US and Western Europe in the early post-Cold War era that Ukraine was better prepared than most former Soviet bloc countries to make the transition from communism to a democracy with a thriving market-based economy. Exemplifying the political situation of Ukraine were the 2004 presidential elections and subsequent Orange Revolution, which saw the conservative and Russian-backed Yanukovich declared the

MAP

Ethno-linguistic map of Ukraine



Map of Ukraine showing the deep ethnic & linguistic divisions between Ukrainians & Russians
Source: GlobalSecurity.org

winner only to face public protests about the validity of the elections, the subsequent ruling by the Ukrainian Supreme Court that the elections were rigged, and the peaceful installation of Yanukovich’s opponent, the political reformer Viktor Yushchenko, as president.

Concomitantly, the Ukrainian economy throughout the 1990s and 2000s was beset by economic slowdowns, frequent currency devaluations, and high rates of inflation, interspersed with only short periods of fragile growth. Like other former Soviet republics, Ukraine remains highly dependent upon Russian natural gas for its energy needs. As events between Moscow and Kiev in 2006 and 2009 have shown, Russia is not afraid to leverage its ability to cut off natural gas supplies heading to Ukraine to make a political point both to Kiev and to European countries to the West which depend upon Russia for their natural gas supplies that are largely transported through Ukraine.

In the area of national security and military relations, during the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukraine assumed ownership of the geostrategic Crimean Peninsula which is home to Sevastopol, the main base of operation for Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Despite an ongoing presence in Sevastopol due to basing rights Moscow negotiated with Kiev, the stationing of 25,000 Russian troops as well as significant numbers of Russian planes and armored vehicles became a constant source of irritation.

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the approximately 2,000 Soviet nuclear weapons stationed in Ukrainian territory during the Cold War were successfully dismantled by June 1996. It is important to highlight, however, that in exchange for Ukraine’s cooperation and Ukraine becoming party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, then President Leonid Kuchma insisted on political pledges from the US, Russia and the United Kingdom in the form of the December 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances. The main points of the Memorandum are to guarantee Ukraine’s “independence and sovereignty within its existing borders”; “to refrain from the threat or use of force against Ukraine”; “to refrain from using economic pressure on Ukraine in order to influence its politics”; and “to seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to provide assistance to Ukraine ... if Ukraine should become a victim of an act of aggression.”

PHOTO 1

Photo: AFP=JJI



Russian President Vladimir Putin (right) & his Ukrainian counterpart Viktor Yanukovich talk during their meeting in Moscow, Dec. 17, 2013.

PHOTO 2

Photo: EPA=JJI



Smoke from fireworks and fires billows into the night sky as pro-Western/anti-government protesters clash with Ukrainian riot police supporting President Viktor Yanukovich in Kiev's Independence Square on Feb. 18, 2014.

PHOTO 3

Photo: Defense News Asia



Russian troops take control of a Ukrainian base in Crimea in March 2014.

“Euromaidan” Revolution

With the many political, economic, and national security challenges facing Ukraine and intensified by the 2008 and 2009 global economic downturn, the pro-Russian Yanukovich staged a political comeback and eventually succeeded President Yushchenko in February 2010. Yanukovich, whose pro-Russian credentials include membership of the Soviet communist party in the 1980s and service as governor of the majority Russian-speaking Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine in the late 1990s-early 2000s, reached out to both the EU and Russia in order to attract the foreign capital necessary to keep the Ukrainian economy afloat and mitigate the likelihood of significant government-imposed austerity measures on the Ukrainian population.

The EU, looking at the opportunity to tie Kiev more firmly to the West to counter Moscow's perceived capriciousness in creating natural gas shortages for Western Europe in 2006 and 2009 and, more importantly, to open Ukraine to more European exports in the wake of the global economic recession, proposed an association agreement. According to the terms of the proposed agreement, Brussels would provide Ukraine with funds contingent on Kiev's implementation of several political and social reforms throughout the country.

Although Yanukovich initially considered the proposed EU agreement, he ultimately refused to sign it, likely because it would result in the loosening of Ukraine's economic ties to Russia. On Dec. 17, 2013, Yanukovich instead signed an agreement with Russia which tied Kiev to Moscow closer still (Photo 1). It was agreed that Russia would buy \$15 billion of Ukrainian Eurobonds and that the cost of Russian natural gas supplied to Ukraine would be discounted by 33%. The actions by the Ukrainian president in turn were the catalyst for civil unrest by young, “Euromaidan” protestors who strongly favored closer ties to the EU and the West. The occupation of Independence Square in Kiev by the Euromaidan protestors followed by increasingly violent clashes with those Ukrainian security forces loyal to the president, nevertheless showed that the peaceful Orange Revolution was a thing of the past. As tensions rose and the protests became increasingly violent, the international community led by Washington and Brussels called on both sides to exercise restraint and find a peaceful resolution to the growing political crisis. Domestic political tensions in Kiev, however, hit a breaking point on Feb. 21-22, 2014, when Yanukovich fled the country, taking refuge in southern Russia just as the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove him from office (Photo 2).

Russia's Annexation of Crimea

In late February 2014, despite what might have seemed to be the triumph of Western democratic values and the return of Kiev to a more EU-leaning position, if not a more balanced stance between Moscow and Brussels, the Ukrainian crisis became an international crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution, new presidential elections were set for May 25, 2014 and an interim government was appointed, which was almost immediately recognized by the US and the EU as the new, legitimate government in Kiev. Predictably, however, Putin condemned the new government as illegitimate and the result of a *coup d'état*, accusing the West of coordinating and funding the Euromaidan revolution, and contending that Yanukovich was illegally impeached and thus remained the legitimate president of Ukraine.

At the same time, pro-Russian forces in Ukraine supported by covert Russian military operations began to gradually take control of the strategically important Crimean Peninsula. While the pro-Russian gunmen occupied Crimea's parliament building, the Crimean parliament voted to dismiss the Crimean government, replace its prime minister, and call for a referendum on Crimean autonomy. On March 16, 2014, a quickly held referendum was carried out in the province where a reported 95% (with a reported 81% turnout) voted to join the Russian Federation. On the following day, Russia and Crimea signed a treaty of accession to incorporate the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Russian Federation. The controversial referendum was condemned by the US, the EU and the UN as illegitimate (Photo 3).

The *de facto* annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation has set up what currently appears to be a difficult and long-running diplomatic challenge between Moscow and the West (Photo 4). Putin maintains that the Russian troops that infiltrated the Crimean Peninsula were aimed “to ensure proper conditions for the people of Crimea to be able to freely express their will”, while the interim government in Ukraine and other Western governments argue that Russia's intervention was a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. Specifically, the US and Ukraine point out that Russia's annexation violated the terms of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, and the obligation to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine. In further trying to justify Russian actions, Putin noted that the UN International Court of Justice handed down an advisory opinion in 2010 stating that the unilateral 2008 declaration of independence by the assembly of Republic of Kosovo, which had largely been supported by the West and for which there was neither a referendum nor agreement from Belgrade, was in accordance with

PHOTO 4

Photo: EPA=JULI



Local residents protest with a banner reading "No War!" as Russian troops move into the Crimean Peninsula at Simferopol on March 8, 2014.

international law. Except for a handful of countries, a majority of the members of the EU have recognized Kosovo's independence.

Subsequently, separatist leaders in the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk organized their own referendums to quit Ukraine, offering vague options of greater autonomy from Kiev, the opportunity of joining the Russian Federation, or the possibility of forming a new republic called *Novorossiia*, or New Russia. Again, though overwhelmingly approved by the local ethnic-Russian majority populations, Washington and Brussels deemed the referendums illegal. Moscow has reacted cautiously and with diplomatic astuteness, calling for "the immediate establishment of a broad discussion in Ukraine concerning its future state structure, involving all of the political forces and the country's regions."

Today, Ukraine sits Janus-like between East and West, tenuously perched on the brink of a civil war. Political unrest in the Ukrainian provinces with ethnic Russian majorities will likely continue as well as calls for greater autonomy at a minimum due to the perception that the central government in Kiev cannot appropriately represent the ethnic Russian minority in the country. Whether the newly elected government of Petro Poroshenko can successfully negotiate with the separatist elements remains to be seen.

Back to the Future

The commemorations this summer marking the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I provide an interesting and important backdrop to the ongoing political crisis between Russia and the West over the Ukrainian issue and its effect on global governance. The so-called "Concert of Europe" during the "long" 19th century — from the Congress of Vienna ending the Napoleonic wars until the summer of 1914 — abruptly ended when the extensive network of alliances meant to preserve the peace resulted in a global conflagration. There was at the time no international organization which could resolve international disputes without resorting to military conflict.

The "short" 20th century, which took hold from the 1919 Paris Peace Conference until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-91, saw the emergence of global governance structured first around the League of Nations and followed by the UN. The League of Nations for a variety of reasons failed to meet the challenges posed by Nazi Germany, fascist

PHOTO 5

Photo: EPA=JULI



Reminiscent of the days of Soviet displays of military strength, Russian servicemen in armored vehicles salute during the Victory Day parade in Moscow's Red Square on May 9, 2014.

Italy, and militaristic Japan during the inter-war period — most of all the non-participation of some of the world's most powerful countries (e.g., the US and the Soviet Union).

The UN organization that was established at the end of World War II was meant to improve on the idea of a global governing body by providing a forum for all internationally recognized countries, no matter how small, in the form of the UN General Assembly. The UN, contrary to the League, however, was also given "teeth" in the form of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The idea was that countries or other international actors which did not conform to the norms of the international community could be challenged within the UN General Assembly, with approval and enforcement by the unanimous consent of the five permanent members.

The overwhelming internal challenge throughout the UN's existence, however, has been the *lack* of unanimous consent amongst the five permanent members — making effective global governance problematic at best. All five permanent members are able to keep the UN from passing, much less implementing, only the most watered down measures that might work against their individual national interests. This has very much been the case with Russia and its involvement in the political crisis in Ukraine. Indeed, the ongoing attempt by Putin to redress the existing balance of power with the annexation of Crimea, and possibly the important, industrialized provinces in eastern Ukraine, threatens to leave the UN in the same state as the League of Nations — a well-intentioned mechanism to support global governance, but unable to enforce international norms in the face of aggression when the national interests of a permanent member are involved. This, unfortunately, is the cold reality for Ukraine, which faces the strong possibility of dismemberment as a result of today's resurgent Russia ([Photo 5](#)). **JS**

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